

100 YEARS OF MLA

Views from the *Bulletin*

The Medical Library Association's centennial year is an opportunity to look back at previous volumes of the *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* and rediscover the themes and issues still important to health sciences librarianship today. The following selection of excerpts from 1939, 1954, 1957, and 1996 addresses aspects of library research, a recurring theme in health sciences librarianship.

Thomas E. Keys, Mayo Clinic

Another thing to come for medical librarianship will be a graduate school for research and for the training of medical librarians. This might well be under the sponsorship of the Medical Library Association. It should be a special school or department of one of our leading universities. . . . To the profession a graduate school might mean a chance for the assimilation of the knowledge of medical librarianship. It would also give the profession a great opportunity for concerted research efforts.

Keys TE. Medical librarianship: looking toward 1970. Bull Med Libr Assoc 1939 Mar;27(3):208-12.

Unsigned

It may be argued that libraries are not set up to handle research problems. For example, it is often said that a library is an organization whose main purpose is operations and not research; as such it is not equipped to cope with possibly non-productive work: it does not have the manpower "cushions" to release staff members from other duties, it does not have the space, and frequently it does not have the people trained in the techniques of experimentation. . . . Even granting that all this is true, however, it is

still possible to do research in an ordinary medical library. . . . What is important is the logical fashioning of the questions to be asked in the research and the reasoned ordering of the circumstances in the experiment so that the questions asked will be answered unequivocally. Just as good medical research is carried out in small clinical centers, so good library research can be carried out in small hospital libraries. What is needed is not size but vision. Surely medical librarians have this!

A plea for research in the medical library [Editorial]. Bull Med Libr Assoc 1954 Jul;42(3):366-7.

William Dosite Postell, Louisiana State University

[W]hat is research and why is it so essential to medical librarianship. The essentials of research are an organized procedure for investigation in contrast to the trial and error method. We develop this faculty when we constantly ask ourselves why. We engage in research when we compile facts systematically and attempt to interpret, and analyze, or explain their relationship. For medical librarianship to advance we must understand the scientific method of solving problems, and appreciate the areas of investigation that will yield results. The greatest opportunities for research are in the fields of analytical bibliography, and the history of medical literature. These fields are not divorced from medical library techniques but are the very foundations of it. . . . The evaluation of medical journals is another example of research that has been and is being carried out. . . . Because medical literature is so vast and expensive librarians have sought eagerly some

criteria that can be used for the selection of current subscriptions.

Postell WD. Research and medical librarianship. Bull Med Libr Assoc 1957 Jul;45(3):399-403.

Betsy L. Humphreys, National Library of Medicine

Many practicing health sciences librarians should find research both possible and rewarding, but others will have neither the opportunity nor the inclination to engage in research. Choosing not to conduct research may be both reasonable and appropriate. Failing to use the results of research is another matter. Judicious application of research results should be a hallmark of the health information professional. Opinions, recommendations, and decisions backed by research data command greater respect—and deserve it. Even when there is no definitive "answer" in the research knowledge base, consideration of what has been revealed by related research can foster more effective practice decisions. . . . More and better research would be welcome, but we already have more interesting research results than we have used effectively. . . . [W]e can use our professional expertise to develop our own strategies for finding, assessing, and applying research results that are relevant to our information services. When we do apply research results to practice, we can tell each other about it.

Humphreys BL. Librarians and collaborative research: toward a better scientific base for information practice [Editorial]. Bull Med Libr Assoc 1996 Jul;84(3):433-6.

*Carolyn E. Lipscomb
Association History Editor
Durham, North Carolina*